



AN ANTHOLOGY OF ISMAILI LITERATURE

A SHI'Ī VISION OF ISLAM

Edited by Hermann Landolt, Samira Sheikh & Kutub Kassam

Pīr Sabzālī

Pīr Sabzālī (Sabz ‘Alī) Ramzānalī (d. 1938) grew up in Mumbai. His widowed mother, worried about her teenage son’s waywardness, sent him to Gwādar, on the coast of Balochistan, to apprentice with the learned Vāras Muḥammad Remu. Under the latter’s tutelage, his character began to change and he soon became known as one of the most dynamic volunteers and gifted orators in the Ismaili community. In 1923, the Imam Sulṭān Muḥammad Shāh Aga Khan III sent Pīr Sabzālī on a difficult mission to Central Asia to contact the isolated Ismaili communities in that mountainous region. Sabzālī kept a diary in Gujarātī of this harrowing journey, first serialized in *The Ismaili* from 1924 to 1926. Below are Episodes 10 and 23 from his fascinating travelogue in which he describes his travels through Chitrāl, now in Pakistan. In Episode 10, written in a literary style, Pīr Sabzālī relates his thoughts about the mission ahead and his complete trust in and reliance on the imam. In Episode 23, Sabzālī encounters large numbers of Mawlāīs, Central Asian Ismailis, in the mountains of Badakhshān. He marvels at their dedication in the harshest of circumstances, revels in their all-night spiritual assembly and fervent recitation of the poetry of Nāṣir-i Khusraw, comments on their eagerness to hear the *farmāns*, i.e. the commands, blessings and instructions of their imam, and expresses his admiration at the devotion of even their youngest children.

Madhya Eshiyā nī rasik vīgato Journey to Central Asia¹

EPISODE 10

It was midnight and silence enveloped everything. All the members of my convoy slumbered soundly. Only the quiet roar of the waterfall crashing down disturbed the eerie silence. I tried to appease sleep’s enchantress with my tossing and turning, but she was displeased and my efforts to placate her were in vain. Thoughts flooded my mind; thoughts that would return so many times during the journey over the snow-capped mountains. Tomorrow’s expedition was to be through those very

1. Pīr Sabzālī Ramzānalī, ‘Ālijāh Mishanarī Sabajā-ālī-bhāī nī musāfarī: *Madhya Eshiyā nī rasik Vīgato*, *The Ismaili*, Mumbai (27 April 1924), p. 4 and (19 October 1924), p. 2; tr. Nizarali J. Virani and Shafique N. Virani in *Journey to the Roof of the World: The Travels of Pīr Sabzali in Central Asia* (forthcoming). The introduction to this chapter is by the translators.

mountains. That evening, I had heard the strangest tales about these mountains, and such images flashed before my eyes.

The ensuing journey would be neither on horseback, nor by mule, but on foot. The owners of the mules had already taken our leave in the evening and departed, as the animals were no longer of use to transport the baggage. We had asked our local brethren to arrange for coolies, who would carry our gear from here on – so that was one matter taken care of. But now another worry had reared its head. That very evening, a few Pathāns had arrived and informed us that a massive amount of snow had accumulated on Mount Lohārī [Lawārī], blanketing the road. They advised that the onward trek would not be possible until it melted. We were shocked to learn that two or three travellers had already been buried in the snow. A predicament now confronted us – should we delay our journey or continue onward? It was a difficult decision, but finally I resolved to carry on and leave everything to Mawlā. All night long, such thoughts swam through my mind.

The coolies were ready bright and early in the morning. We weighed the baggage and entrusted it to them. Labour charges were by weight in that region. For carrying one ‘butty,’ which is around ten of our pounds, from where we were to the camp of Daroz [Drosh], it would cost about seven to eight *kābulīs*, or roughly five of our rupees. It turned out that we could still take a horse or mule to the next way-station, so we let the coolies set out first, and we readied ourselves to follow them. Our local brethren entreated us to delay the trip until we received favourable news, but I was set on our plan. An experienced elder suggested, ‘carry dried onions and apricots in your pockets, because when you arrive at the peak of Mount Lohārī, there will be an awful stench from the snow. It overpowers some people and they pass out. At that time, the onions and apricots will come in handy [for overcoming the smell], not to mention how useful they will be to eat while travelling.’

After breakfast, we were on our way. Though we had taken a horse with us, we often had to lead it on foot because of the heavy snowfall. The entire road was covered in snow and walking was tortuous. The snow-capped mountains towered even higher with the accumulation of snow, just as they seemed smaller when the snow melted. So mountains that had appeared small from a distance now loomed much larger as we approached them. The encounter was quite unnerving, as we had never experienced anything quite like it before.

It was impossible to see far, as the dazzling silvery-white mountains were blinding. These terrifying scenes erased from our hearts the whole muddle of thoughts that had occupied them. All we could think about now was what lay ahead. At such a place, a person, no matter how unflinching, could not help but think of death’s minions hovering over his head. The mountains appeared more and more fearsome as we progressed, but even in this frightful place, we could make out the roofs of houses, now engulfed in snow. Such was the power of nature! Some of the houses lay completely buried. I just couldn’t imagine how people managed to subsist in such treacherous environs, so I asked the attending orderly about it. He explained that nobody lived there in the snowy season, but

that once the snow melted, the houses would once again become visible and the residents would even come back to inhabit them. This explanation amazed me, but on our return journey, we did, in fact, see hundreds of houses with people in them, as the snow had melted by then.

After some time, we arrived at Gurjar [Gujur], an encampment in the midst of the colossal snow-covered mountains. The darkness of evening now enveloped the area. Even the local mountain people dared not be out at this time, but fate had dictated that we now break in the midst of the terrifying mountains, so we entered the camp. The guard was a Panjābī who respectfully cleared the bungalow and also prepared the guest house for the staff. The coolies had not yet arrived with the baggage. As time passed, the blizzard became more fierce. We were famished, so the guard brought us refreshments. After about two hours, the baggage train, for which we had been waiting, arrived. We were to pass the night in this snow-covered place.

The coolies asked permission to spend the night in the neighbouring mountains. Touched by the courtesy and politeness of their request, I was inclined to accede. However, the learned guard, who was wise to the ways of the coolies, told me not to consent as they would not show up on time the following morning, and it would be impossible to recruit other labourers there. Moreover, if word of our presence spread, new problems could arise. The advice was sound, so we just permitted four or five of them to go out to obtain foodstuff and return immediately. Two of the labourers were exhausted and they made arrangements for replacements, so we allowed them to go as well. Now, everything was in order for our sojourn at this place. It was impossible to sleep though. The day's frightening scenes flashed before my eyes. An icy wind began to howl furiously and with it, the blizzard intensified. We lay in our beds remembering Mawlā.

EPISODE 23

We left Kogaj [Koghuzi] at about 7:30 in the morning, arriving in Morai [Muroi] at around 10:00 am. After some tea and refreshments, we set out on our journey once again. At about 12:30 pm, we arrived in Barenish [Barenis]. It was here that Chitrāl's current ruler, the honourable Mihtar-saheb, had grown up. At this point, I should tell you about a local practice. In these parts, any child born of aristocratic lineage is entrusted, in its early days, to be brought up by a family in a suitable town. In accordance with custom, the present leader, the honourable Mihtar-saheb, was raised here. The man who accompanied us at the Mihtar-saheb's bidding was a resident of this area and it was in his very home that the Mihtar-saheb had grown up. He made all the arrangements for us to be accommodated at his house, and insisted that we rest there.

After a short respite, we continued onwards until we reached a place where we were forced to stop in our tracks. From atop the mountain, large rocks were constantly raining down. As there was a gushing stream next to the road, we had

no choice but to continue on our current course. Dismounting from our horses, we waited. Whenever there was a gap of a few seconds between falling rocks, one by one we dashed across to safety. Despite our precautions, one of our companions was severely injured on the face by a rock. Our colleague, Ramzān Alibhāi, immediately set about tending the wound. This mountain of tumbling rocks is known as Dārā Galāsh [Draghalosh].

At around 7:00 in the evening, we arrived at a place called Reshun. Mawlāis had gathered here in large numbers. After a full day of travel, we were completely exhausted, but our fatigue dissipated as soon as we saw the joyous faces of the Mawlāis. Elaborate arrangements for our accommodation had been made at the residence of Bahādūr Fidāi Jamādār Shermuhammad. At each station, the affection and hospitality displayed by the Mawlāis was ever more praiseworthy. Their hearts were overflowing with the purest love. We spent the entire night in a *majlis*, a spiritual assembly. Enraptured, those devotees sweetly sang odes to the illustrious missionary, Nāṣir-i Khusraw, and recited his poetry. They were ever-ready to sacrifice their lives and possessions for Mawlana Hazar Imam's *farmān*. In those regions, they are severely persecuted for their devotion to Mawlana Hazar Imam, and for honouring the missionary, Nāṣir-i Khusraw. If they praise him openly, they have to endure all manner of oppression. However, they care not a whit for this and live their lives openly as true devotees. Words fail me in praising how the night was imbued with splendour by the *majlis*.

At the break of dawn, hundreds of women and children had gathered and were sitting with great anticipation so that they could hear the *farmān* of Mawlana Hazar Imam. As soon as the reading commenced, all listened attentively with immense respect and decorum. Hearing the *farmān*, their eyes brimmed over with tears of joy. How fortunate they were today! Among them were those who were saying, 'Our ancestors yearned longingly their entire lives to hear these very words of blessing, but never had that chance. Today, our Mawlā has sent those blessings right to our threshold. Can there be any day more joyous than this?'

We would marvel to realize that the minds of even their tender-aged children are imbued with such lofty principles. Here, a single example will suffice. At the time of Mawlana Hazar Imam's blessed visit to Mumbai in 1923, I had gone to Apollo Port, accompanied by a nine-year-old Badakhshānī boy. Never before had he received the *didār*, the beatific vision of Mawlana Hazar Imam. Noticing how euphoric he was, I asked, 'What was it that you saw today that has made you so happy?' His reply was beautiful. He said 'Today, I have witnessed the *didār*, the beatific vision, of that king for whose name I would give up my life.' On uttering these words, his eyes filled with tears of joy. Such love for the imam of the time from a nine-year-old child. What devotion!

Almost all the residents of Reshun are Mawlāis. In the evening, exiting the compound, a mighty river flowed before us. Off in the distance were snow-clad peaks. A company of men and women could be seen on the mountain. After a spell, five Mawlāi horsemen came from that direction. They entreated us to go

to the opposite mountain. No matter how tired we were, we couldn't refuse their heartfelt request.

It was a gruelling way ahead. As our Badakhshānī companions were familiar with the road, even they began commenting that the path was difficult, and suggested that perhaps the Jamat should be asked to meet us midway at a place called Kosht. However, we didn't feel right about this, because it would cause immense discomfort for them to go there, a journey of two days, with young children. So instead, all of us set forth to meet them. We had traversed some pretty rough terrain in the past, so even hearing about this road, we couldn't really imagine that it would be any more difficult. However, the more we progressed, the more rocky and broken the road became. Though we had horses with us, they were useless for riding on these paths. In addition, a lot of snow had fallen and it was bitterly cold.

Finally, we completed the route and reached the rest stop. After a brief respite, food was prepared. Some green vetches that grew in the area were cooked as a curry. We were thrilled to see vegetable curry after many days. However, as soon as we had eaten a bit of it, we started to vomit violently. We realized that some poisonous leaves had been cooked in the curry. With God's grace there were no further ill effects. We spent the night here with the Mawlāīs and departed for Gupis at 10:00 the next morning.

(Translated by Nizarali J. Virani and Shafique N. Virani)